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WHY BUDDHISM?

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Foundation of Religions

Before we discuss this subject “**Why Buddhism?**” we must find out how the ideas of religion started in man’s mind at the beginning. Thousands of years ago when man began to think about various kinds of natural phenomena in this world, he noticed many wonderful occurrences. When certain natural forces or phenomena were not in his favour he had to suffer. He had seen disasters and terrifying incidents. Then he started to think how he could prevent these unfavourable conditions which created fear, suspicion, insecurity, tension and suffering. He knew that many of these things were beyond comprehension and therefore, he thought there must be some invisible powerful supernatural forces or persons behind all these happenings. These

occurrences, which were difficult to understand, were thought to be the work of various 'gods'. He began to worship them and to make animal sacrifices hoping to please these supernatural powers. He also started to praise and worship in thanksgiving when certain phenomena were in his favour, thinking that these too were the acts of the gods. The aim of these practices was to gain protection and blessings from these gods to live in this world without facing many difficulties. When these concepts started to develop, certain other important practices were also incorporated. They were rites, rituals and ceremonies or festivals. Separate communities organized them according to their own needs in their own geographical regions. When there was a big enough body of ceremonies and philosophical thought, 'religion' became an intrinsic part of every civilization.

The foundation of religion was laid by man at the beginning for self-preservation because of fear, suspicion, insecurity, misunderstanding of life and natural phenomena. These served as the foundation for religion as materials like bricks, stones, sand, cement and earth are used for laying the foundation of a building.

After that, man embellished this building of religion by introducing faith, offerings, prayers, vows, penalties, morals and ethics in the name of god in order to control mankind, and also to find out an eternal place called paradise for everlasting happiness and peace of the soul.

The Foundation of Buddhism

Later, another religion called ‘Buddhism’ came into existence but we find that the Buddha did not use any of those age-old beliefs. He did not exploit the concept of god, the soul-theory, eternal hell or eternal heaven to formulate Buddhism. He did not exploit fear and distorted views regarding the natural phenomena to support his religion. Neither did he demand blind faith or unnecessary rites and rituals. He did not believe in self-torture, the imposition of penalties or commandments in the propagation of Buddhism. He also did not seek the authority of any external divine agency to strengthen his arguments. He used entirely original ideas or materials such as the Right Understanding of life, the world and natural phenomena or the cosmic order and the real characteristics of mind and matter, elements and energies, moral and spiritual development, discipline, mental training and purification, knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment to erect this religious building called Buddhism. It is true that He used certain religious materials used by other religionists at that time such as Karma – action and reaction, rebirth and certain moral principles but he did not do so in the same manner or in the same sense. He refined them and presented them in a rational and scientific way.

An Independent Religion

Buddhism is not a concoction of religions or diverse religious ideas. The Buddha did not collect materials from

other religions or philosophical ideas from here and there. Buddhism has its own characteristics and identity.

By realizing that no other religious teacher had found the Absolute Truth and a lasting formula for the final salvation of man, He pointed out that other thinkers had developed only certain worldly powers and could manage to attain only certain stages of spiritual development without complete purification of the mind, free from all superstitious beliefs, impurities, illusion, delusion, imagination, hallucination and ignorance.

The real meaning or the purpose of 'religion' can be understood when we study how the Buddha introduced this 'noble religious way of life.' If we utilize the word 'religion' when discussing the teachings of the Buddha, we must also understand the different interpretations given to this word by other religionists. Then anyone can understand 'Why Buddhism?' is needed while there are already so many other religions in the world.

No Dogmas

The Buddha removed certain misconceptions which had been held by people for thousands of years. The belief that soul is a permanent entity created by God had to be given up when the Buddha gave strong reasons why it is a wrong concept and why there is no such thing as a permanent entity. According to the Buddha it is only a dream. This belief exists in man's mind just like the visual object of rainbow colours where there is no reality. The

Buddha explained that the idea of soul is only a misunderstanding of man's consciousness. This concept of the soul is a very important issue in every other religion, but only the Buddha has clearly stated that there is no reason whatsoever for us to believe in its existence. For example, in those days everybody believed that the sun and moon rotated daily round the earth. People had this belief due to a lack of proper knowledge of the solar system. But when Copernicus proved that it is not the sun and the moon that rotated round the earth but that the earth goes around the sun, then slowly people realised the truth.

There was another misconception people had about the earth. For thousands of years people believed that the earth was flat. Galileo proved that the earth is round but not flat. Later people accepted that truth also.

When Copernicus discovered that the sun is the centre of our solar system, people had to give up the former belief that the earth was the centre of our universe.

The belief that many ancient philosophers had up to the 19th Century that the atom is the ultimate entity of matter, and that it was impossible to split it, was given up when nuclear scientists did split it.

The theory of evolution which was formulated by Charles Darwin disproved the then popular creation theory that life was created by God. Geologists, biologists and physiologists also explained very clearly that it had taken millions of years for the appearance of the first life forms

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on this earth. These discoveries never contradict the teachings of the Buddha in any way. Modern discoveries of the gradual development of mineral life, plant life and other living things and living beings conform with the teachings of the Buddha.

When we study the explanations of the Buddha regarding the Cosmos we find that He mentions the existence of certain living beings, both fortunate and unfortunate, not only in this world but also in certain other planets.

Modern scientists and astronomers are open minded on this subject and have conceded the possibility of the existence of some living beings in certain other planets.

Many traditional beliefs are exactly like the man's primitive beliefs about the world system and the origin of life. But the Buddha's teachings confirm the new discoveries.

The Buddha did not support the belief that religious rites and rituals were the only means for man to find salvation. According to the Buddha the development of morality, concentration and the purification of mind are important aspects of religious life leading to final salvation.

He pointed out that a religious man must lead a harmless, unblameable, respectable, decent, noble and pure life. The mere act of praying or making offerings does not by itself make a man religious or gain his perfection and salvation.

The Buddha also advised people to refrain from evil practices. The reason for keeping away from evil must be for the welfare of living beings and not because of the fear of a god or punishment. At the same time He advised us to cultivate the good humane qualities, practise good deeds and help others without any selfish motives.

The Buddha was the only religious teacher who gave due credit to man's intelligence. He advised us not to become slaves to external agencies but to develop our hidden powers with self-confidence.

He also pointed out that man is responsible for everything in this world. His pain and pleasure, both were created by him and he has the ability to get rid of his sufferings and maintain peace, happiness and wisdom by using his effort, without depending on external powers. Man's untrained mind is responsible for all the troubles, calamities, disturbances we face today. At the same time man's mind, if used properly, can change this unfortunate situation and can make a peaceful, prosperous and happy world for all to live in. This can be done only through the purified mental energy of a trained intellect.

Face Facts

This is a religion which always encourages man to face the facts of life without acting as a hypocrite and to accept the truth whatever it may be. Therefore, Buddhists do not reject the facts pertaining to worldly matters discov

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ered by great thinkers and scientists. Although the Buddha paid more attention to spiritual development, he never neglected man's worldly progress. In His teachings we can find some sound practical advice for man to work properly without wasting valuable time and effort and also to act wisely for the progress of mankind. He said that man should fulfil his duties towards his family, relatives, friends, community, his country and the whole world.

Therefore, Buddhists should not ignore their duties and obligations to make this a happy and peaceful world by contributing their share within their capacity. He also did not interfere with the affairs of government or with reasonable laws imposed by government. He was not against any social custom and tradition if it was harmless and useful to the society. At the same time, he also never sought political or military power to introduce his way of religious life although the kings and the ministers were his followers.

This is a religion which teaches us to serve others, to sacrifice our own comfort for the sake of suffering humanity, and to observe religious precepts or disciplines voluntarily, but not as commandments imposed by some unseen power. By observing such good principles according to our own conviction not only do we get the chance to be perfect but we also help others to live in peace.

This perfection is the highest goal which a person must attain in order to gain his salvation. It cannot be

obtained through the influence of any god or mediator.

According to this religion we can see the results of most of our good and bad actions within this life time. Heavenly bliss or Nibbanic bliss can be experienced within this life time. It is not necessary to wait to see the results only after our death as taught by many other religions.

That is why the Buddha always welcomes people to come and see His teachings but not to come and believe at once. He also advised people to choose a proper religion by considering, and investigating in various ways without accepting anything through emotion or blind faith. This is why Buddhism is called a doctrine of analysis. Here in this religion, we can see the scientific and psychological analysis of mind and matter which modern thinkers can appreciate.

Universal Laws

The Buddha was the teacher who discovered the real nature of the universal cosmic law and advised people to live in accordance with this law. He mentioned that those who violate this law, such as going against nature, and leading an immoral life, must be ready to face the consequences.

We can see ample proof of this today. Since the Industrial Revolution of the last century, vast areas of the earth have been laid to waste, seas and rivers polluted to such an extent that we may never be able to recover from the damage done to our natural resources. This has been directly caused by man's overpowering greed for

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material wealth and is due to his lack of understanding of the fine balance between Man and Nature.

It is impossible to escape from the reaction of such cosmic laws simply by praying to god, because this universal law is unbiased. But the Buddha has taught us how to stop the reactions of certain bad practices by doing more and more good deeds, by training the mind and eradicating evil thoughts from the mind. After violating the cosmic order there is no other method to get rid of the reaction except by co-operating with the same cosmic law. Selfishness must give way to selflessness. Greed must give way to generosity.

The Karma that the Buddha has explained has been accepted by the world famous psychologist Carl Jung as collective consciousness. This is nothing but the depository of Karma seeds in mental energy. As long as the collective consciousness and 'will to live' remain in the mind as mentioned by the philosophers also, rebirth will take place whether people believe it or not. The elements of the body may disintegrate but mental current together with 'will to live' will be transmitted and another life will be conditioned according to that collective consciousness.

Gravitation and law of conservation of energy discovered by the modern scientists like Newton support the doctrine of Karma or action and reaction introduced by the Buddha.

According to the Buddha, man can even become a god if he leads a decent and righteous way of life

irrespective of his religious beliefs, but other religions only advise man to pray to god to get blessings. They also preach that only after death can man go to heaven, but that heavenly bliss or experience does not mean that man too can get the privilege to become a god. However, the Buddhist concept of god is different from that of other religions.

No founder of a religion has ever said that the followers too can one day get the chance to gain the same wisdom, the same peace, happiness and the same salvation as did the founder of that religion. But the Buddha has said that anyone can become a Buddha if one can practise the same perfection, the same method practised by Him.

The Nature of the Mind

The rapid changes of the mind and the elements of the body have been explained in Buddhism. According to the Buddha in every fraction of a split second the mind appears and disappears. Biology, physiology and psychology also teach the same nature of changes in life. Therefore life is not static.

Psychologist Prof. William James has explained the point-moment of consciousness. He discussed how consciousness comes into being and passes away again in rapid succession.

According to the nature that causes the continuous process of mind, as soon as a mind is born, it gives birth to another mind and dies. The mind that is born in turn

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gives birth to another mind and dies, and so on.

To the question how evil thoughts appeared in man's mind at the beginning, the answer can be found in this religion. The cause of those evil thoughts is man's selfish motives which exist due to craving for existence and in his belief in a permanent ego that constantly craves satisfaction of the senses.

When we study the life and the teachings of the Buddha we can see that everything is open to everybody. There are no secret doctrines.

The events which took place during his whole life were open and there were no hidden and mystical incidents. In the eyes of the Buddha, so-called supernatural powers to many people are not supernatural but only natural phenomena which the ordinary man cannot comprehend. As man's knowledge and understanding of the universe increases his belief in the supernatural decreases. To primitive man 'thunder and lightning' were manifestations of angry gods. Today, we know they are merely electrical charges.

If the component things are subject to the natural laws of change, decay and death, how can we introduce them as supernatural powers?

Even the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death took place openly. He lived as a normal religious teacher and as a real human being.

The Buddha has pointed out the process of evolving from the animal life into human status and from human status into the divine state. Divine life proceeds

to the Brahma state and Brahma life into perfect life. One can also proceed from a noble pure life directly into a perfect holy life. The Buddha has pointed out the reverse order as well, that is, going from human life into animal life.

Moderate Way of Life

The Buddha has advised people to follow the middle path in every aspect of their lives. But many people have not realized the real meaning and usefulness of this noble middle path. The deep meaning of this middle path is not only a righteous way of life, not only avoiding two extremes of life, and not only leading a moderate life but to learn how to use human senses or faculties without misusing or abusing them. The meaning of the formation of these senses is to protect our life, to avoid certain dangers and to find our livelihood. Unfortunately, many people spend their lives only in the gratification of these senses and misuse them to satisfy only their desires. Finally, their craving becomes more intense but they never get the satisfaction they crave for. Many immoral practices, cruel deeds, mental disturbances, nervous breakdowns, unhealthy competition, tension and unrest which are very common in the modern society are due to this discontented mind which misuses the senses. Then the instinctive power of these senses also gradually starts to decay and many types of sickness appear in the human organs. That is how man pays the price for misusing or over-taxing his five senses. If there is too much

attachment to sensual pleasure in this world and we have no time to mould and prepare for our future life or the next world, then life will become miserable.

The Buddha has advised that it is cruel and unfair for us to destroy any living being, however small it may be. But this gentle attitude has been ignored by many other religious teachers who teach only that it is wrong to harm another human being. Destroying the lives of other living beings is not the only way to be free of the nuisance created by them.

The aim of Buddhism is to awaken mankind to the attainment of the highest happiness through a clear understanding of life and nature. Its aim is not to create certain imaginations or to please the emotion of the people or to indulge in uncertain worldly desires. It also does not promise eternal mundane pleasure anywhere.

Buddhism gives a clear picture of both sides of life. The real nature of life, the cause of suffering and the cause of happiness. Medical theory, science and technology have not discovered any remedy for man's mental pain, frustration and unsatisfactoriness of life.

What is Wisdom?

From the Buddhist point of view, wisdom is based on right understanding and right thought, the realization of the universal law and development of insight not only to see the truth but also to receive the way for complete liberation from the unsatisfactoriness of life.

Therefore, real wisdom cannot be found in academic

institutions or in the laboratory of scientific research or in a place of worship where people always go and pray or perform certain rites and rituals. The wisdom is within the mind. When the experience, understanding, realisation and purification are completed, this wisdom, comprising of the highest perfection can be seen. The aim of life is the attainment of this wisdom. Instead of searching for what there is in outer space, man must make the effort to find out the nature of his own inner space to reach his final goal.

Man can get rid of the worldly natural forces which are not favourable to him by the strengthening and purification of his mind to attain a supra-mundane state of happiness where these forces have no power to function anymore.

One philosopher has said that religion contradicts all that man has ever experienced. If it is so Buddhism does not belong to that type of religion since the Buddha has taught us everything through His experience which was always human in nature.

Many philosophers, great thinkers and scientists have used only their worldly knowledge, thinking power and wisdom to find out many things and they have expressed their views accordingly. Even with such intellectual knowledge it is impossible to understand the real nature of phenomena without the purification of the mind. When we study certain statements made by some scholars we can see some truths in their sayings. But many of those sayings remain as dry philosophy because

they have used only their brains with much illusion and egoism. But the Buddha has used His brain and heart: as refined human intelligence coupled with compassion and wisdom to understand the things in their proper complete perspective. That is why His teaching has never become a dry philosophy or theory, but a practical method to solve human problems.

This is the only religion which was explained to mankind through the experience, realisation, wisdom and enlightenment of the founder. It was not given as a message from a god. Human problems must be understood by a human being through human experience by developing great humane virtues. A teacher of men must find out the solution to settle human problems through the purification and development of the human mind. That is why the Buddha did not introduce himself as a supernatural saviour. According to him we are the only saviours to save ourselves.

Does real religion hinder world progress?

Many scientists, great thinkers and philosophers have adopted a hostile attitude towards religion. They say religions hinder the progress of mankind and mislead them by introducing ridiculous, superstitious beliefs and practices and try to keep people away from the facts discovered by the scientists. In fact Karl Marx has said “Religion is the opium of the people.” But when we ascertain what they mean by religion, we can understand that Buddhism does not belong to those religious groups.

Therefore, in time to come if those intellectuals succeed in refuting religion, it is impossible for them to throw away Buddhism as a false religion because, the Buddha has revealed the absolute truth. If there is truth anywhere it will remain forever as a truth. If any truth is changeable under certain conditions then it is not the absolute truth. That is why the truth revealed by the Buddha is called the noble truth. That truth leads man to be a noble man. Therefore, there will remain a noble, righteous way of life which is strong enough to face any intellectual and scientific challenge. In that respect, the Buddha's message is unshakeable. Intellectuals surely give due respect to this way of life if they really can understand what the Buddha taught. Therefore, the teaching of the Buddha will continue to be a way of life, continue to aspire for a noble, holy and perfect life, a life of peace and happiness whether religious labels exist or not.

A free Religion

The freedom that the followers of the Buddha enjoy in this world is commendable. In fact, many Buddhists have not yet realized this. We have full freedom to judge and to think, either to accept or to reject anything. We are not bound to accept anything in the name of religion either simply by thinking of the greatness of the religious teacher or by thinking that it is our duty to accept just because those teachings are found in our holy scriptures or because they are our traditions or customs. Buddhists are at liberty to investigate and to accept only if some-

thing is agreeable with their own convictions. Buddhists do not accept or reject anything without any sensible reasons. They never say that they are forbidden to do this or that. They say that they do not like to do something because it causes some trouble or misery or pain or disturbance amongst the masses. They do certain good deeds not because Buddhism asks them to do so but because they realize the value and meaning of such good practices for the welfare of others. This is a religion of freedom which never restricts the personal affairs of man if they are not immoral or harmful. Buddhists have full freedom to organize their family affairs without violating the basic religious principles. This religion is like a gold mine to intellectuals to do some research work and to find out the deeper aspect of psychology, philosophy, science and the universal law, for the spiritual development and for the liberation of mankind from unsatisfactoriness and unrest. That is why for more than 2500 years Buddhism could manage to convince the masses in almost every Asian country. At that time people invited and welcomed the Buddha's teaching as a peace message or a goodwill message. That is why Buddhists could manage to introduce this religion without any difficulty, without adopting any kind of exploitation, without upsetting the already existing cultural practices.

The cause of our problems

Another important aspect in this religion is the

explanation of the main cause of human problems and sufferings. According to the Buddha, we are facing all these problems in this mundane world due to our strong craving which exists in our mind. He has revealed that there are three kinds of craving forces in our minds and these are responsible for our existence, rebirth and all the other thousands of problems and mental disturbances. They are: –craving for existence, craving for worldly or sensual indulgence and craving for non-existence. To understand the real meaning of this, we have to think about this very carefully and wisely until realization comes to us.

World famous philosophers and psychologists also have also explained the same three forces in different languages as causes by existence. Arthur Schopenhauer explains these three forces as sexuality, self-preservation and suicide. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud explain the same things as libido, ego instinct and death instinct. Another psychologist, Carl Jung says: “From the sources of instinct spring forth everything creative”. Now see how great intellectuals are prepared to support the truth revealed by the Buddha twenty-five centuries ago. However, when we examine these explanations, we can understand that the Buddha has gone beyond the understanding capacity of other great thinkers regarding these issues. ■